WORLD

# War for Water? Syria, Iraq and Turkey Will Next Fight for Rivers, Report Says

BY **TOM O'CONNOR** ON 7/27/18 AT 6:21 PM EDT

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The next war in the Middle East could be fought over water as Iraq, Syria and Turkey scramble to assert claims to two vital rivers that run through the region, according to a new report.

Nabil al-Samman, a Syrian expert on international waters, made the case for an upcoming "water war" in an article published Friday by Saudi newspaper *Asharq Al-Awsat*. The article defines the term as being used to refer in the Mediterranean to "the use of water as a weapon in order to control its sources, or the diversion of water as a commercial commodity controlled by powerful upstream states for political ends." The piece outlines a decades-long history of difficult relations and devastating conflicts that have set the stage for a potential upcoming crisis between Syria, Iraq and Turkey.

"When the sounds of guns and war drums fade in Syria and Iraq, new tensions may arise because of water, especially in their conflict with Turkey, from which the Euphrates and Tigris rivers flow," the report read.

In eastern Syria's Euphrates River Valley, drought and mismanaged government policies helped fuel support for protests that eventually morphed into a 2011 nationwide insurrection backed by the West, Turkey and Gulf Arab states. The subsequent insurgency and Syrian military's campaign backed, by Russia and Iran, to retake the country has left critical water infrastructure in ruins. Across the border in western Iraq, 15 consecutive years of war and insurgency following the 2003 U.S. invasion have left a similarly dire situation, but Turkey retains a powerful, controversial hold on the region's natural resources.

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A member of the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces, made up of an alliance of Arab and Kurdish fighters, splashes water at Lake Assad, an enormous reservoir created by the Tabqa dam, April 29, 2017. After having taken the dam from ISIS, the group's political wing is negotiating to returning it to the Syrian government's control.

DELIL SOULEIMAN/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Just as the Syrian and Iraqi governments appear to be regaining a grasp of their respective countries, Turkey has pushed forward with the Southeastern Anatolia Project, an ambitious initiative to build 22 dams and 19 power plants that could curb water flow into the downstream states by as much as half. The idea was originally crafted by the modern founder of Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk—and current Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has sought to cement the project's completion.

For decades, the project stirred tensions between the neighboring countries, but political disputes have prevented negotiations from ever making progress. In addition to differences over the amount of water that would flow into Syria, the two countries have also quarreled over Damascus's claims to Turkey's southwestern Hatay Province and over Syria's alleged protection of Kurdish separatists that have waged war on the Turkish state. After holding talks in 1962, both countries began rounds of negotiations over water distribution that progressed as relations improved when Syrian President Bashar al-Assad took power in 2000. However, Turkey's support for Syrian rebels and ongoing occupation of parts of northern Syria have prevented the two from restarting talks.

Syria and Iraq have their own long history of diplomatic failures that played out for decades as opposing factions of the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party. The two governments also held talks in 1962 and attempted to settle find common ground over the Euphrates River that runs through their countries—and continued to do so through the 1990s. Since the U.S. ouster of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, relations between Baghdad and Damascus have been enhanced. Iraq has attempted to maintain relations with both Syria and Turkey, but, like Syria, has at times criticized Turkey for military incursions against Kurdish militias in Iraq. In what the article calls "the absence of an Iraqi-Syrian agricultural strategy," Ankara has maintained its dominance over the rivers.

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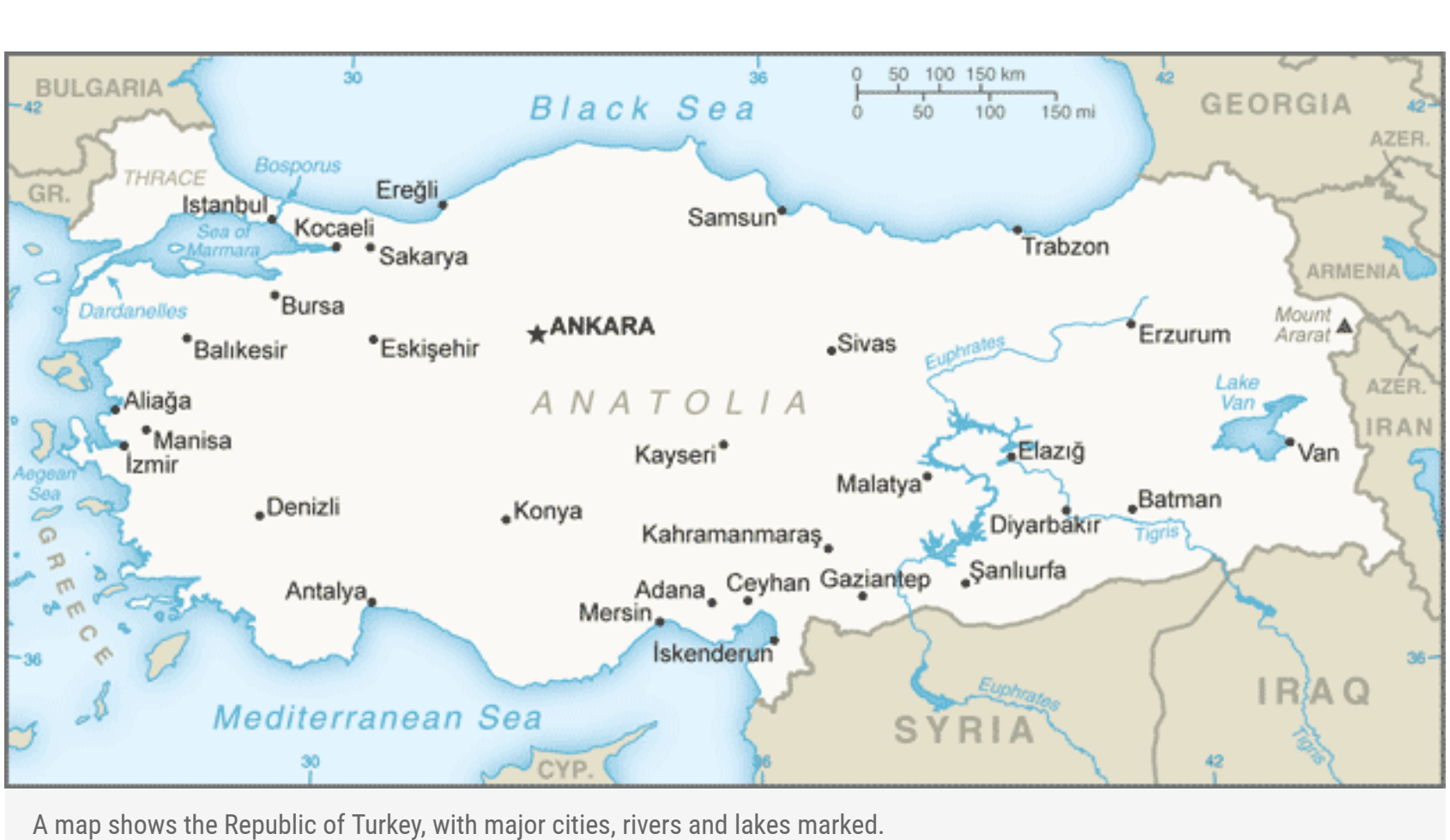
As the report notes, Turkey argues it's entitled to more water because its land is more fertile and has wielded control over the flow of the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers in the water-scarce Middle East, similar to the way in which the monarchies of the Gulf have exploited their vast, lucrative reserves of oil. Upon the opening of the Atatürk dam in 1992—a major part of the Southeastern Anatolia Project—the article quoted then-Turkish Prime Minister Suleyman Demirel proclaimed as saying: "The water that flows to Turkey from the Euphrates, Tigris and its tributaries is Turkish...We are not saying to Syria and Iraq that we share their oil resources...They have no right to say that they share our water resources."



A map shows the Republic of Turkey, with major cities, rivers and lakes marked.

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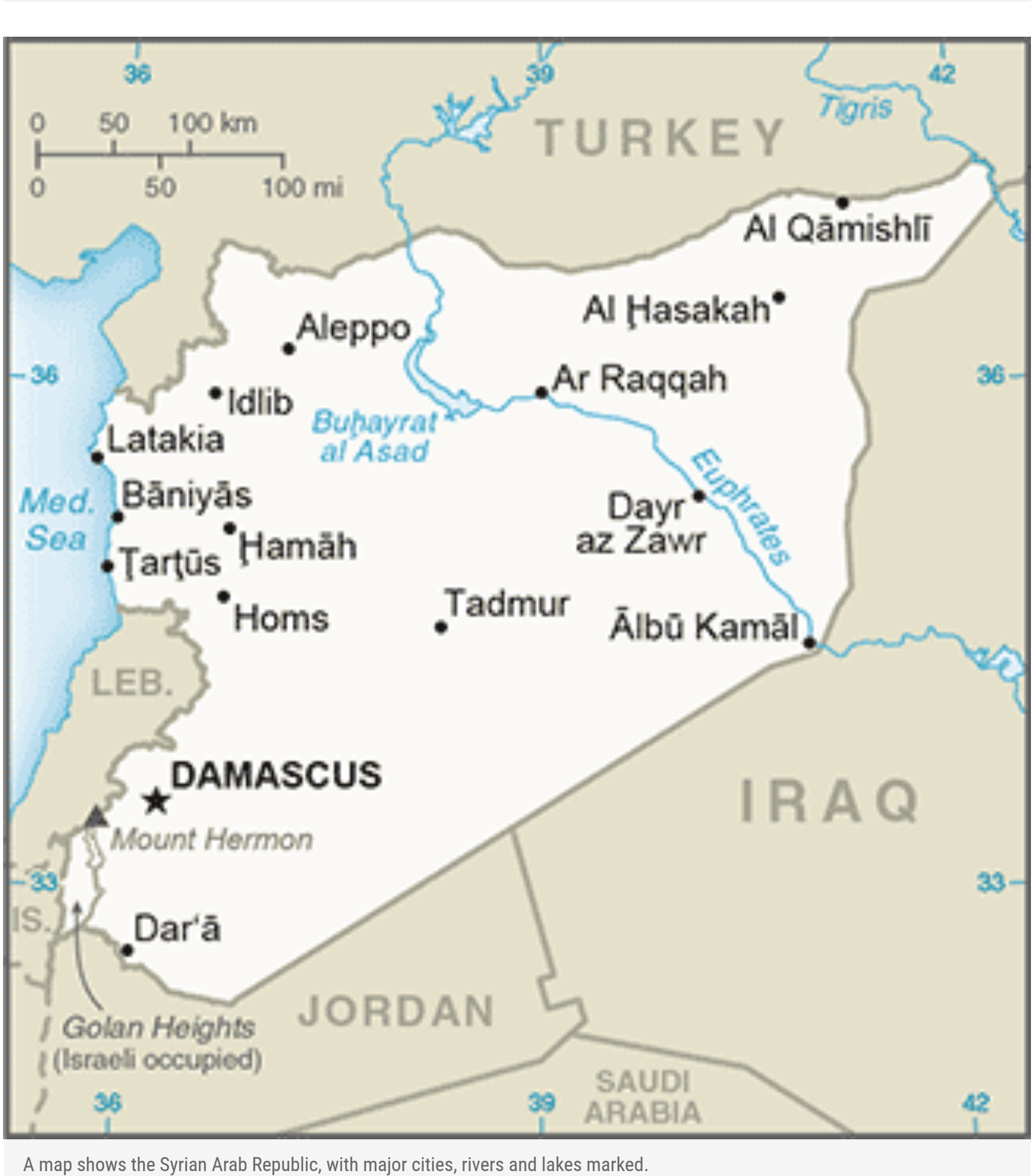

A map shows the Syrian Arab Republic, with major cities, rivers and lakes marked.

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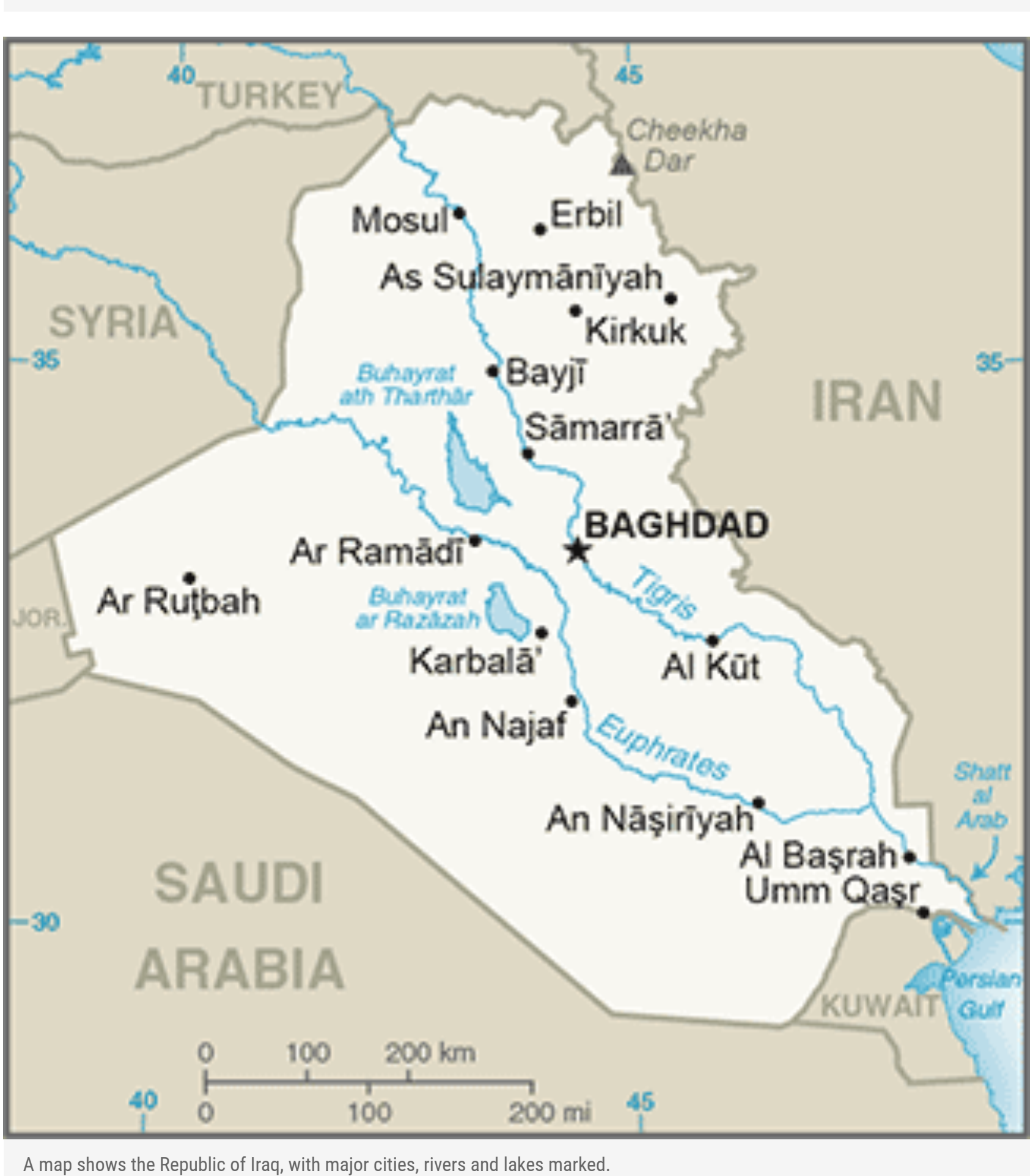

A map shows the Republic of Iraq, with major cities, rivers and lakes marked.

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The conflict became so serious that, in 2010, a scenario drawn up by the U.S.-led Western NATO military alliance, of which Turkey is a member, imagined a joint Iraq-Syria invasion of Turkey, according to the Middle East Policy Council. Today, the chance of war-weary Iraq and Syria engaging in such a conflict are slim, according to the *Asharq Al-Awsat* report, but residents of both countries are increasingly feeling the pain.

In Iraq, Turkey's construction of the Ilisu dam means the restarting of a pump at the Mosul Dam—which was recaptured from the Islamic State militant group (ISIS) in 2014—may not be enough to resuscitate the barren fields of the once-luscious Nineveh plains, as Reuters reported last month. *The Financial Times* further explored earlier this month how Iraq was racing to revamp its aging, damaged irrigation system to make up for anticipated losses in water flow to the Tigris River.

In Syria, another former ISIS-held dam has become a major point of talks in the nation's ongoing civil war. The pro-Syrian government campaign has retaken most of the country, leaving only pockets of jihadi and rebel control, along with about a quarter in the hands of the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces. Unlike the largely Sunni Muslim Arab opposition, the mixed Arab-Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces have sought to negotiate with the government. On Friday, a delegation of their political wing went to Damascus to discuss the transfer of control of key points, including the Tabqa dam, which lies on the banks of the Euphrates and Syria's largest reservoir, Lake Assad.

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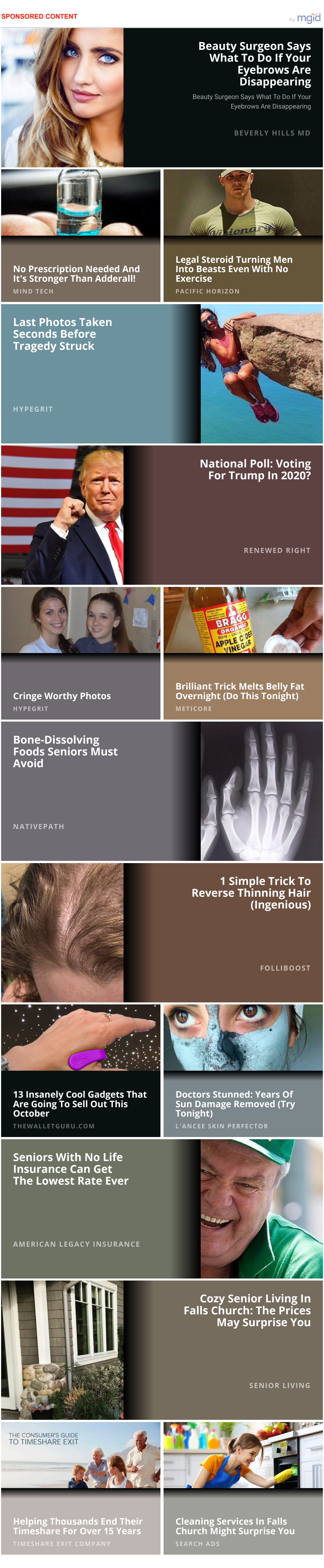

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